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SUBJECT: Climate Change: Interagency Obstacles Threaten Greek Forests

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) Interagency coordination obstacles and a weakened forestry service continue to threaten Greece's ability to adequately protect its forests, wild lands, and meet climate change targets. Greece recently agreed to associate with the Copenhagen Accord through the EU (ref A), but by not addressing its growing wildfire problem, it leaves a significant gap in its climate change priorities. Post has engaged many forest policy officials, pressing for a forest protection policy based on prevention rather than focusing on reactive measures. Greek officials have been thankful for U.S. support, primarily U.S. Forest Service (USFS) training through a \$2.1 million USAID package that is set to run out in 2010. In recent meetings, Greek officials have been somewhat responsive to Post's engagement, stating their hope to establish legal forest boundaries and ramp up public prevention campaigns. As the wildfire season approaches, Post continues to encourage responsible policy from the Government of Greece (GoG) to protect the country's natural environment, as part of the global effort to combat climate change. END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) Many of the factors multiplying Greece's wildfire problem do not come from nature, but from a lack of policy (ref B). The Greek press, as well as officials in the GoG, often point to improper land-use laws and lax enforcement as a major incentive for arson. Greek Minister of Environment, Energy, and Climate Change Tina Birbili has had partial success addressing this issue of illegal construction on burnt forest land. According to a November 2009 draft law which Birbili introduced to Parliament, any areas of burnt forest land would go on a national land register and be designated as forest land. The draft also bans all construction permits for areas affected by forest fires. According to press reports, Birbili and the General Directorate of Development and Protection of Forests (DPF), which is under her Ministry, were at odds over how to proceed with mapping Greece's forest land. According to multiple Embassy contacts in GoG and the forestry community, two fundamental discrepancies conspire to undermine Greece's ability to protect its forests: 1.) no clear definition or boundary for forest land and; 2.) no agency clearly responsible for the protection of that land.

Greece Must Establish A Legal Definition for Forest Land...

13. (SBU) A basic first step for a country to improve its forest protection is to clearly identify what area is deemed a forest and therefore should be protected. During a January 22 meeting with Econcouns and Econoff, Parliamentarian (and former Parliament Environment Committee President) Kyriakos Mitsotakis explained that forest mapping is the most pressing problem for Greece's forestry service, the DPF. Mitsotakis, a prominent member of the New Democracy party (and brother of former Greek FM Dora Bakoyannis) and an advocate for environmental issues, explained that one of his top environment priorities as a Parliament member was enacting legislation with legal definitions and boundaries of forests. He lamented that private landowners and the GoG foresters often end up "wasting time" in court disputing what is forestland. Contributing to the problem, Mitsotakis added, was a lack of proper forest mapping.

14. (SBU) Dr. Gavriil Xanthopoulos, researcher at the Institute of Mediterranean Forest Ecosystems, in a January 19 meeting with Econoff also explained that the already strained DPF (ref B) spends most of its time in court over legal questions regarding forest land. Xanthopoulos believed science could help solve Greece's forest definition problem. He specifically advocated the use of remote sensing to map the country's forest land to establish a proper baseline. Xanthopoulos said that the GoG had not released appropriate remote sensing data to the academic and scientific communities, nor to the DPF. Xanthopoulos stated that the DPF probably would not yet be capable of using remote sensing data to map all of Greece's forests without further Geographic Information System (GIS) and Change Detection training. Xanthopoulos also pointed out that if the GoG invested in these areas, the expertise would support better enforcement to mitigate illegal construction on burnt forest land, thus removing the incentive for arson.

...And Determine Who is Responsible for Protecting Forests

15. (SBU) A clear delineation of responsibilities also is necessary for forest protection. The Hellenic Fire Service has interpreted their responsibility as fighting forest fires to protect lives and property, despite a shift in GoG policy in 1998 which significantly diminished DPF's role and budget (ref B). DPF has claimed it has neither the responsibility nor funding to pursue even public fire prevention campaigns. On January 20 Econcouns and Econoff met with the new Chief of the Hellenic Fire Service (HFS), Lieutenant General Stylianos Stefanidis, who replaced Lieutenant General Athanasios Kontokostas. General Stefanidis thanked the United States for the on-going training program based on the 2007 USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) package to help Greece confront its wildfires. Stefanidis wished to continue the program through its completion, expressing his desire to prioritize Aerial Firefighting and Fire Investigation training. Stefanidis noted that since the last USFS Fire Investigation training course in 2008, HFS has improved its fire determination rate by 20 percent.

¶16. (SBU) HFS officials could not identify specific forest fire prevention methods and only generally mentioned that public awareness campaigns exist, although they could not provide details. HFS officials claimed that the DPF is responsible for public awareness campaigns. Econouns and Econoff explained that the United States has had a decades-old successful public awareness program to protect our forests through the iconic Smokey Bear campaign and persistent interagency cooperation, and encouraged the HFS to commit to working with the DPF to develop a public awareness campaign for Greece. General Stefanidis took the suggestion on board and said that the HFS would welcome a public awareness training module as part of the USFS technical assistance package for 2010..

¶17. (SBU) Interagency coordination still appears to be an obstacle for forest and fire officials. On January 28, Econoff met with the Head of Forest Fire Prevention in DPF, Theodoros Pallas. Pallas claimed that all responsibility for forest protection rested with HFS, contradicting what we had learned from HFS. Pallas stated that any time HFS wished to work with DPF, DPF foresters were ready and willing, but they rarely were included in forest fire policy discussions. Pallas intimated that HFS was responsible for public awareness funding as well, although he believed DPF should pursue a program similar to the Smokey Bear campaign.

¶18. (SBU) Pallas mentioned the need for a firefighting unit that was able to immediately respond to forest fires in the earliest stages and quarantine the flames using backfiring, as the "Forest Commando" unit did in the 1990s (see reftel B). Pallas also stated that Greek foresters must begin to employ brush removal and controlled burning, but they currently lacked the legal authority and proper training. Pallas stated that there was no plan for additional hiring or training and many of the current foresters are close to retirement. Pallas mentioned the DPF had been without a Secretary General and lacking leadership since the reorganization under the Ministry of Environment in October 2009.

COMMENT

¶19. (SBU) Post has delivered to the Minister of Environment, the Minister of Citizen Protection, the Chief of HFS, and the Head of Forest Protection Department, recommendations from USFS encouraging Greece to emphasize interagency cooperation, improve forest monitoring, and improve fire prevention campaigns. Post will continue to assist USFS and Greek officials to ensure that remaining programming in the 2007 OFDA package completes successfully in 2010. While many of the challenges surrounding forest protection policy are internal to the GoG, opportunities do exist for the United States to encourage and support best practices for interagency cooperation and fire prevention campaigns. GoG officials have expressed enthusiasm for U.S. leadership in previous training with USFS and FEMA, and appear to be positively influenced by the professionalism and expertise of USG officials. Post will continue to explore areas beyond the OFDA package for U.S.-Greek cooperation on climate change priorities, such as forest protection.
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